PITTA

Newsletter of the Birdwatchers' Society of Andhra Pradesh
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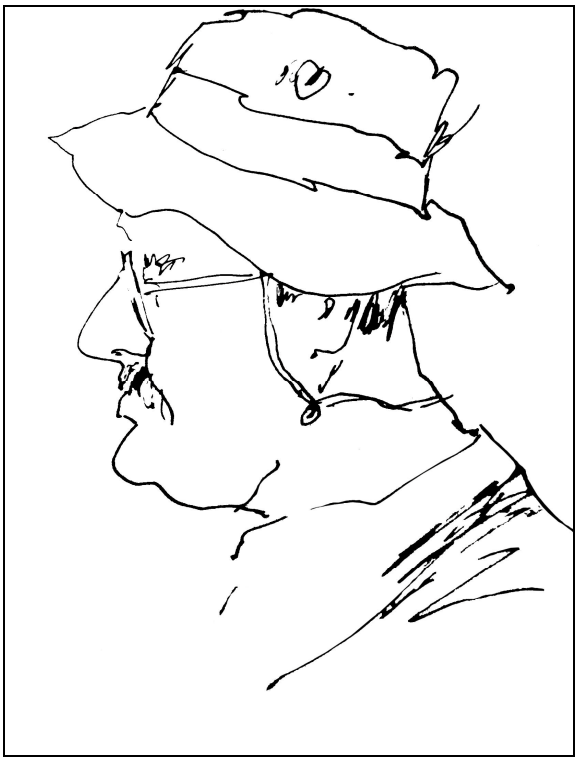
Editors' Note

Some time back, we had informed our members of our plan to bring out a Special Issue of the Pitta to honour the memory of late Shri Siraj Taher (1942-2010), President Emeritus of BSAP.

We had requested you to send us articles, writeups, anecdotes, photographs and any other personal memories that you may like to share, about the time you have spent birding or otherwise interacting with Sirajsaab.

We present here the results of this endeavour, and hope that in some small way, we have been able to give tribute to a man who was one of the contemporary giants of ornithology.



S is for Shikra[1]

Aasheesh Pittie

In 2010 I lost two people who were very dear to me. They had studied in the same school, lived out their lives in the same city, had many common friends, at least one common hobby, and both died, within two months of each other, in the same hospital. Both were paterfamilias of more than one 'family' – philately and ornithology. Both had a tremendous impact on my life. Their journey into the sun was uphill.

[1] The title is a reflection of Helen Macdonald's visceral account of coming to terms with her father's death, through the numbing ordeal of training a Goshawk. I've borrowed and changed her book's title, here, for recalling my time with Siraj sahib has been no less wrenching. Too, he celebrated the shikra.

Siraj sahib was passionate about birds. That is how we met the first time, at a meeting of the fledgling Birdwatchers' Club of Andhra Pradesh [BCAP]. The fact that he was a generation older than me was never discussed between us, while everything else was. The Hyderabad he grew up in, the social culture of *tehzeeb* that made him what he was, has now vanished. He came to birds in the best way possible: First, pursuing them for sport, once a gentlemanly pastime, played to exacting rules; then swerving towards conservation, like so many of his enlightened contemporaries. I pressed him once, to tell me why he gave up his gun. He'd shot a sambhar once, a poor shot, he confessed. The injured stag blundered off into the forest. Raised in a tradition that valued a pricked conscience, he decided to follow the stricken animal and put out its agony. But the sambhar fought the inevitable for several hours, staying either unsighted, or out of range from its pursuer. When finally he caught up with it, the profusely bleeding animal was finished. The sight of the dead animal, and the realization that here was a living being that need not have died, had indeed tried to escape death, moved him immensely. With the bursting of its heart, that sambhar converted its nemesis forever towards conservation.

After a couple of outings together as part of the BCAP, we began to hit it off. To this too, there was a quirky angle, which showed the *apnapan* of those days.

One evening he met an old school friend of his in Riyazath Husain's iconic bookshop on Abid Road, A. A. Husain & Co. After the pleasantries and backslapping subsided, under the convivial eye of the senior Mr Husain, Siraj sahib asked him, "*Arre, ek bachcha aata hai hamare chidiyon ke* club *mein. Tu jaanta kya*?" In a city steeped in social niceties, the use of the "*tu*" was reserved for those that were dear to one; unlike the rough meaning it is ascribed today.

"*Apna hi bachcha hai,* Siraj," chuckled my father. Again that *tehzeeb* – not the grasping "*mera bachcha*", but the inclusive "*apna*".

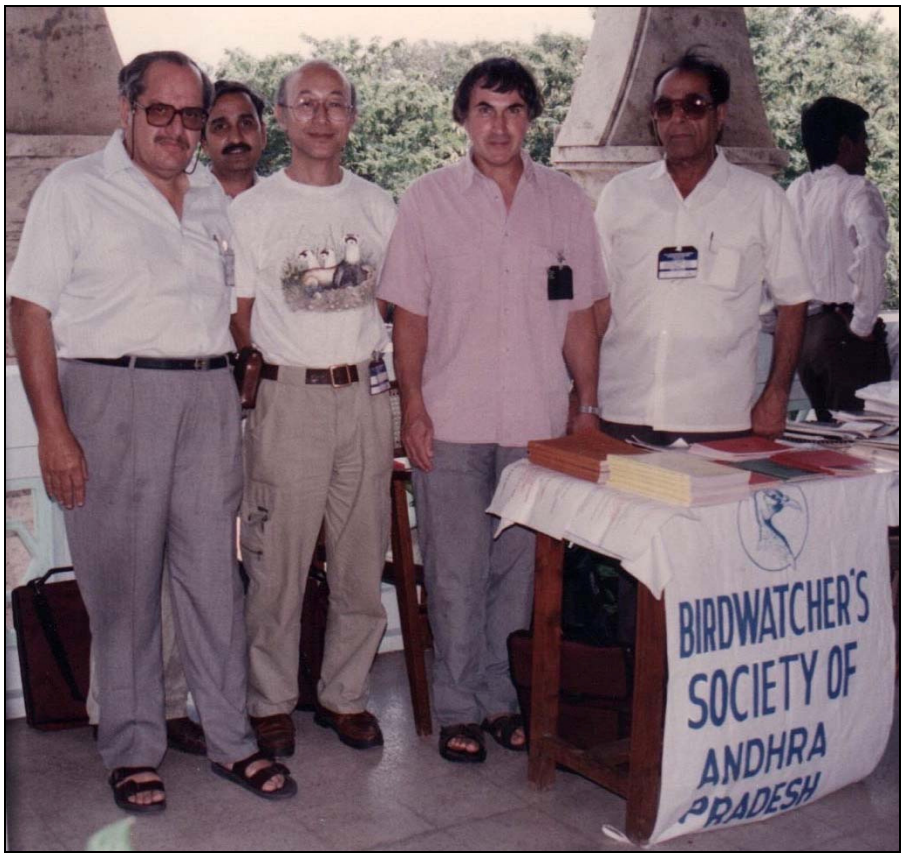
In the next outing, he stumped me with a loud "*Arrey, tum bolaich nahin ki* Murari *ke bete hain*". Seeing me taken aback, he chortled the bookshop episode. After that, my birding outings had no querulous or disapproving looks at home. I was going out with *shareef log*. Thus began a life-long association with one of the finest people I've known. In some matters he took me under his wing, in some we did things together.

That *shareef* quality of the man, I think, was ultimately what drew so many people to the BCAP, which was rechristened the Birdwatchers' Society of Andhra Pradesh [BSAP] upon its registration. The hierarchy of the organization was never apparent to any of the participants. Except for Mr Pushp Kumar, top gun in the Andhra Pradesh Forest Department, who was thus accorded a genteel deference by the elderly birders, the subtle unsavouriness of implied superiority, whether of rank or knowledge, never left its residue on any of us youngsters. Everyone travelled together in the Forest Department's jeeps, all walked to where the birds were, victuals were mutually partaken, and the day's count discussed later in a much-anticipated circle of friendship. Topical and irreverent banter, and repartee, were the norm. This was an exceptional illustration of the altruistic spirit of those who planned, promoted, popularized, and participated in this pastime. And to my mind, the single factor that contributed to the organisation's successful promotion of an undoubtedly new concept of outdoor activity for the citizenry of Hyderabad. Plus, who could deny that element of thrill, shrouded in the past of fondly recalled boyhood days, of a Boy Scout's revving adrenalin, of a golden nostalgia that tugs adults to another shot at nirvana? The wilderness, and its wildlings, does such things to men.

Every specialized activity has its own terminology, and ornithology was replete with enough to confound a polyglot; its lexicon spanned classical European languages, English, Sanskrit, and the immense mythologies of the world's cultures! This hurdle notwithstanding, our motley group soon cobbled together a bristling argot of nicknames, abbreviated codes, hand and eye signage, and often, a whistled mimicry of surprising drollness, pulsating with distinct onomatopoeic bemusement. Newcomers stood stupefied by this bunch of loonies telling

time on a tree while trying to locate a bird! Siraj sahib was privy to this notorious gang, and thoroughly enjoyed the perplexity of the uninitiated. Being accepted into the group was considered a rite of passage.

His sense of fun was legendary. It often kept in good humour a tired, flagging group returning after a day of slim pickings. A master raconteur, he spiced tea breaks with stories from vintage days. In turns becoming moist-eyed-sentimental for the *Days of the Beloved*, or rasping street-slang *Hyderabadi* in his baritone.



The BSAP 'pavilion' at the first Pan-Asian Ornithological Conference in Coimbatore, 9–16 November 1996.
L to R: Siraj Taher, M. S. Kulkarni, Noritaka Ichida (Vice-President of BirdLife International, and Chairman, BirdLife Asia Council), Tim Inskipp, and Maj. Ahmed Abdul Aziz. Photo: Aasheesh Pittie.

For Siraj sahib, every birder was special, and welcome to his home. I met many heavyweights of the birding world there, and cannot recall even one person who was not at as much ease, as he would be in his own drawing room. The city's birding lads walked in and out as if they were visiting their own homes. To me it was always a special place. I went there for all the reasons that a deepening friendship draws two people to spend time together. Our discussions ranged from ornithology, to social behavior, politics, the philosophy of morality, and ethics; the nuances of Urdu *shaayari*; the importance of art in comprehending the world; the unceasing turmoil that was the status of our environment; the way to take the Society forward – several ideas springing up spontaneously during conversation, which we worked on and made something of. But the deepest moments were the silences we lapsed into between words, ruminating, pondering, or simply savouring thoughts that rush in at the end of a satisfying flow of words. I always took away the comforting thought that here was someone who I could speak with about subjects that shone with clarity once the polishing strokes of give and take had burnished their cantankerous edges.

L to R: Siraj Taher, Richard Grimmett, and Aasheesh Pittie (1996). Photo: Aasheesh Pittie

The heady plan of collating our own checklist of the birds of Andhra Pradesh was cast during one such evening. Why could we not do it? It was the first step to more comprehensive ornithologies – but this was achievable by just the two of us. As often happens, the force with which an idea hits one, it also pushes out and lays bare methodologies for fructifying it in the same instant. I do not think it took us more than half an hour to decide our workflow and apportion our responsibilities. Subsequently, there must have been innumerable meetings to iron out creases, to enjoy quaint discoveries in published accounts from the past, to streamline every step so that both were on the same page with regard to content, presentation, citation, taxonomy, etc. But there was no major change; no rollback of methods; no U-turn on our road map.

Release of the *Checklist* in 1989, in the corridor of the A. P. Forest Dept. building.
L to R: Maj. Ahmed Abdul Aziz, Pushp Kumar IFS, S. Ashok Kumar. I am talking about the work,
a stack of which can be seen on the bottom left of the picture. Photo: Aasheesh Pittie.

Comparatively, the translation of the *Birds of Southern India*, by Richard Grimmett and Tim Inskipp (2005), into Telugu, was a minefield. Collaborations were imperative because he only had a good working knowledge

of the language, could be the ideal Telugu-speaking ornithologist, but was not proficient enough to take on the entire work himself. Translating the extensive lexicon of birding, into a language that seemed to have no specific, definitive words to suit scientific interpretations, had to be executed by a twin-nibbed pen: One, that wrote with bold hearty strokes, delineating the work; the other, with the fine point, working in all the telling details that illuminated the manuscript. I was the troubleshooter who tried to unclog detritus in the workflow, to ensure smooth progress. Not least of these was dealing with the names for the colours of plumage, "brownish-yellow," "blue-green", etc. Ultimately we did get our own Telugu colour palette! Siraj sahib worked hard and long at the manuscript, and may have taken it through at least six proofs, after, often nerve-wracking meetings with the translators. The fine pointed pens scratched away day and night, and I would notice fresh stacks of papers during our daily meetings. He had this thing for coloured inks and would mark up his sheets with differently coloured inks, each colour linking a unique chain of thought. He wrestled with extant Telugu bird names, which were invariably of a generic nature, and had the distinction of coining dozens of new ones. But it was mighty frustrating work, and often did I catch him in a reverie, absentmindedly sucking at the end of a pencil. The lack of a consensus, the engine that could have driven this naming work, rankled him. Invitees never bothered to respond, except a few, for which he was so grateful. Dialect, that verbal filigree of distinctiveness within a language, a culture, tortured him, till one day he realized the only way forward was to ignore it. One could not please everyone. When published (2007), it was a work that justified his sense of achievement, in that of his team, and in his pride that the Society was a co-author.

Siraj Taher speaking at the release function of the Telugu translation of *Birds of Southern India* (2005)
L to R: A. K. Malhotra IFS PCCF APFD, Asad R. Rahmani (Director, Bombay Natural History Society),
and Shafaat Ulla. Photo: Aasheesh Pittie.

Siraj sahib, and indeed, Pushp Kumar, worked with an extraordinary zeal to promote an awareness of birds among Hyderabad's citizenry, and as a consequence, highlighted the environment we collectively belong to. The media, both print and radio, smelled the potential of an unique angle to pitch stories, and people began to discuss birds, the urban environment, and even the activities of the BSAP! Birds have always attracted mankind, and when brought out from the realms of literature, poetry, art, or even mythology, into the ambit of casual conversation, they ushered delight, rekindled memory, nudged people to look around and notice the natural world. The quiddity of our surroundings during our growing up years is deeply ingrained in our bones, recumbent though it may lie as we rush about our busy days. But comes a moment when memory stirs, awakened by a petrichor sprinkled upon our passivity by people like Siraj sahib, and a delightful facet of the natural world is miraculously visible to us. Birds can charm the most indifferent of people!

If passion fuels altruism, the result is joyous. Siraj sahib's involvement with BSAP was such a phase of his life. Whether he was organizing a field outing; writing in long hand the next month's programme on *all* the post cards that he would himself mail at the post office; correcting proofs of the Society's publications; sitting with the patience of a Buddha for various permissions from a forest official; answering media persons, even when they came unprepared and posed prosaic queries; preparing environmental assessment reports of places he deeply cared about, like Kolleru Lake, and sending them to the concerned authorities on behalf of the Society; speaking to students; chairing symposia – it was all "for the birds", as though he had an oath in heaven!

Siraj Taher being honoured as the first President Emeritus of the Birdwatchers' Society of Andhra Pradesh (30 August 2009).
Standing L to R: K. Nanda Kumar, Umesh Mani, Shanti Mani, Siraj Taher, K. Bhardwaj, and Shafaat Ulla.
Seated L to R: Aasheesh Pittie, J. V. D. Moorty, Sushil Kapadia, and M. S. Kulkarni. Photo: Aasheesh Pittie.

And when his penchant for the living bird needed a rest, out would come his philatelic collection, with *birds* as its theme! He worked on it whenever he found time, and even displayed it successfully (winning competitions) in several philatelic exhibitions. The Forest Department regularly petitioned him to display it during their annual Wildlife Week celebrations, and he would willingly oblige. After all, it presented a fantastic opportunity to convert the visiting school kids to a lifetime love of birds, and philately!

He took great pleasure in the company of life-long friends, in the earthy delight of seasonal fruit, in the song of garden birds, in the pressure of his granddaughter's tiny hand around his finger. In a sense, he did see that world in a grain of sand. And when the end came in the month of January of that fateful year, he had a befitting farewell. A gentle evening descended; the annual *numaish* that he enjoyed with his dear Ayesha flung high its illuminated, rotating, giant-wheel; Mukesh's poignant, pathos-filled "*Jeena yahan, marna yahan*" wafted from that direction; and as clods of his hometown earth sprinkled the path of his onward journey, a pair of spotted owlets, his endearingly-named *Chakwa-Chakwi*, exchanged yarns inside a dusty tamarind.

Two months later, that other person, his friend, my father, too passed away.

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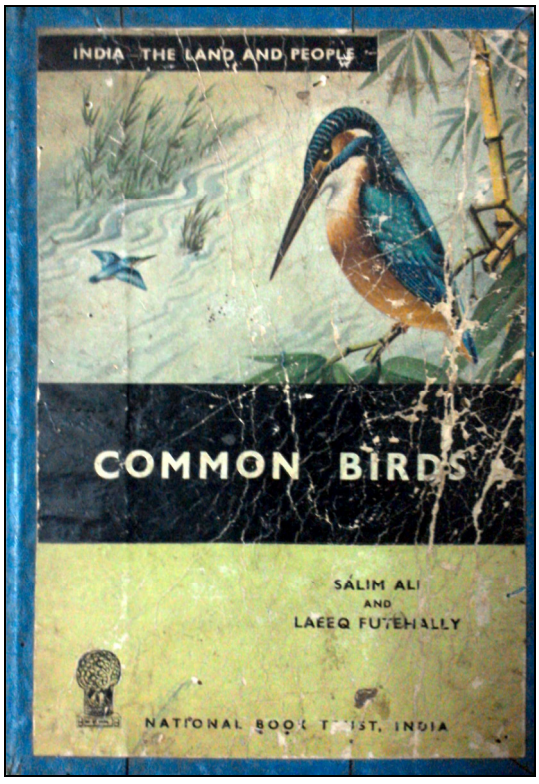
The Gift of a Book

Humayun Taher

It was on a hot May afternoon in 1979 that I, a young lad of some nine-odd summers, spoke two words that were to change my life forever! I remember that day well; I had just finished my daily ritual of watering the plants in the garden and sprinkling water on the dusty verandah where the family foregathered in the cool of the late summer afternoons; the summer vacation was upon us and I no longer had recourse to the massive text-books that are the usual accompaniment of a 9-year-old schoolboy. In this backdrop, I made my momentous observation, albeit in a peevish voice - "I'm bored...!"

The stout gentleman taking his ease in his favourite easy-chair beside me gave me a stern look. Truth to tell, I was (and remained for all time) a trifle scared of the old man! I wondered, quailing a little under that stern grey eye, what I had said that seemed to warrant a scolding. But then the eyes softened, and my father told me that the person who could make so ignorant a statement as being bored within his or her own house was a poor example of humanity. Surely, he said, a confirmed book-lover himself, with the presence of so many books in the house to be read, one should not want in the matter of things to do? I confess that, like most schoolboys perchance, my association with books was limited to the scholastic tomes that we had to pore over under the stern and watchful eyes of our pedagogue. That it was possible to read books for mere pleasure seemed to me to be slightly far-fetched.

Running his fingers through his grizzled hair, Dad heaved himself out of his chair and went inside. He reappeared carrying a small hard-back book bound in blue imitation leather. The front of the book carried a striking picture of some colourful species of fowl. I wondered, as I stared morosely at this literary masterpiece, whether I was expected to use this to while away my boredom. My father put this book into my hands and told me, with a smile, that it was now mine! I wasn't well-pleased because I had a sort of sneaking suspicion that I would later on be expected to pass an examination on the little masterpiece. But the book did have a certain fascination. I looked closely at the title - "Common Birds" by Salim Ali and Laeeq Futehally: it is, alas, not a very common book these days.



Turning over the pages, I found myself fascinated by the colourful pictures of the birds depicted. And the text too was charmingly simple; no erudite commentary here... it was written in plain language, easily understood, and even more easily grasped. I sat there and devoured that book as I had never done any of my schoolbooks before – or since!

One of the first things I noticed was that several of the birds depicted in the pictures were creatures I was already familiar with. As a member of a household that regularly featured fowl of many sorts at table, and also on the strength of a large aviary in the house crammed with diverse little birds that were, until this supreme moment, merely "dicky birds", I was able to identify some of the birds myself. I learned that the very tasty "*teetar*" is known as the Grey Partridge; the tiny little "*lal munia*" was the Red Munia or Avadavat and the "*jungli badakh*" with the bright yellow beak that I remembered as being exceedingly delicious, was the Spotbill or Grey Duck. The learning of these names seemed to me to bring these interesting fowls closer to me. I cannot say for certain, but I do think that probably, it was that first read of that book given to me by my father, which converted me forever into a birder. And life has never been the same again! Too, I am never ever bored!!!

The man who presented me with that book on that warm May afternoon in 1979 was my father, Mr. Siraj Ahmed Taher!

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The Extraordinary Birdman

JVD Moorty

"What are you writing?" enquired a gruff voice. It was our – my spouse was with me – first field trip with the BSAP to the Agricultural University in 1983. I showed the Voice my bird list, the last entry being the Purple-rumped Sunbird. We were rank beginners with ID knowledge of birds in single digits. The said bird alighted on a bush nearby and we were asked to identify it, which we successfully failed to do! Sirajsaab – that's how I had always called him – then very gently told us that birdwatching involves using one's own eyes and ears first, before referring to a book or blindly following the names called out by someone else – which is what we were doing. A lesson taught and learnt, and a new birdwatcher added to the flock. He then proceeded to show us the illustration in Salim Ali's *A Pictorial Guide to Birds of the Indian Subcontinent* and explain how to complete the picture. I later bought this book in Delhi for a princely sum of Rs. 108/-, and which was my companion on many a field trip for a long, long time, and something that I still refer to nostalgically even today.

Over the years Sirajsaab, whom, along with the late Mr. Pushp Kumar, I consider my birding mentor and guide, shared a kind of friendship that I cherish to this day. Now I share the same rapport with Humayun, who is carrying on the legacy of his father with aplomb.

Sirajsaab was always at hand to explain the nuances of observing birds and making field notes, to any novice floundering in the labyrinths of watching and identifying birds. He spoke with such infectious passion that it wasn't difficult to fall in love with this hobby that, today, is just as fascinating for me as it was 30+ years ago.

After our daughter, Shefali, was born, he told me that he had nothing more to do with me socially and that he would interact with her more than he would with me. He was totally fascinated by her telephone manners and said he had never heard anyone so young responding on the telephone the way she did, with extreme politeness.

His ready wit and command over the language were phenomenal. Once I called him up requesting him to explain the concept of 'dowry' in a Muslim wedding as I had to translate a document into German and needed to understand the concept. His immediate reaction was to sternly tell me to put down the phone, so that he could

contact my spouse as I appeared to be contemplating bigamy!! Of course I did finally get my explanation, but not without having had my leg pulled.

His telephone calls – cellphones weren't invented back then – always started with a greeting and an enquiry about whether I was free to talk, before he said anything else. Whenever Shefali answered the phone, he would first talk to her before he would ask for me. I could see this indulgence later with his grandchild.

And who could forget his a-kind-of-green-coloured car. A Fiat of the early 1960s with a number plate APC 1. (Humayun! Apologies!!).

When his health took a turn he told me nothing was going to happen to him and that he would be still be around. My last interaction with him was in 2009 at Aasheesh's place where he was honoured by the BSAP for his indefatigable services to the Society and to the conservation of birds.

On 7th January 2010, I received a message that Sirajsaab had passed away. I was in Thailand and never felt as helpless as I did at that moment. I lost a mentor, a friend and my birding "guru".

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Siraj Taher – a Scholar and a Gentleman

Suhel Quader

My father had been a schoolmate of Siraj saab, and when I showed an interest in wildlife he naturally took me to meet him (coincidentally, I was a schoolmate of Humayun, though that wasn't how the connection was made). My earliest recollections of him are from my visits to his old home on Road No. 1, Banjara Hills, with its large trees and cool rooms; and his father resting in a beautiful old armchair. This was around 1984 or 1985. Since then, I have spent many hours with him, talking about birds at home and on countless field trips.

Rather than reminisce about these times together, I will recall some special qualities of his qualities that I have later tried to hold up as a standard for myself.

As a scholar of birds, Siraj saab was a meticulous worker. He would carefully write and draw his observations in his notebook, as he walked around in the field. He always insisted that we youngsters note down what we had seen immediately because, as he said, memory is frail and fickle. He was also honest to a fault, never one to jump to conclusions about the identification of a difficult bird. In those days, the only comprehensive guide to the birds of India was the *Pictorial Guide*[2], in which the artist had bravely managed the difficult feat of making groups of similar-looking species (like warblers, pipits) utterly indistinguishable. We would stare at the plates, like devout supplicants, until we threw our hands up, having decided that divine intercession was not forthcoming. Our last resort was the *Handbook*[3]. To Siraj saab (as to us all), this was like a Bible, and he would exclaim in glee whenever some peculiar behaviour observed in the field was found to be already perfectly described in it by Salim Ali. "The Old Man is right again", he would exclaim.

Apart from this, and perhaps above all, Siraj saab was a kind man, quick to praise and appreciate. He made special efforts to get youngsters interested, and help them through the first stages of trying to identify common species. When he did criticise some transgression of mine in manners or (even worse) bird identification, it was

[2] *Pictorial Guide*: "A Pictorial Guide to the Birds of the Indian Sub-continent": by Salim Ali and S. Dillon Ripley. Illustrations by John Henry Dick.

[3] *Handbook*: "Compact Handbook of the Birds of India and Pakistan together with those of Bangladesh, Nepal, Bhutan and Sri Lanka" by Salim Ali and S. Dillon Ripley.

always with a twinkle in his eye, and with a ready forgiveness thereafter.

For him, bird watching was a pleasure and a delight. But a birdwatcher's calling, he felt, must go beyond – to careful documentation and from that to stewardship and conservation. From this, I believe, we can all take inspiration.

We will all die one day. But from the way we live our lives, from our actions and from the lessons we teach, we pass fragments of ourselves down the generations. Siraj saab was an exemplar for so many of us; and in us he lives on.

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Siraj – the Birdman of Hyderabad

Shafaat Ulla

My association with Siraj goes back to more than three decades. In fact we were family friends and our children, almost the same ages, grew up together. We used to meet very often, stag or with families, at parties, pot-luck dinners and picnics.

Irrespective of where we met, Siraj would always regale me with interesting anecdotes about birds and their behaviour. These I always listened to with fascination and which, subconsciously, created in me an interest in birds. Let me recall a few of his '*gems*' which got permanently imprinted in my mind, which may also be of interest to the readers:

--- Hairy caterpillars, avoided by most birds, are loved by the Cuckoos, who dip them in water before swallowing!

--- Shrikes impale extra food on thorns for later consumption – hence known as the 'butcher birds'.

--- Kingfishers always swallow fish head first to avoid sharp dorsal fins. Also, while diving for the fish, they correct their dive angle to compensate for the light refraction. Remember dipping a ruler half way in a bucket of water and observing how it looks bent?

--- Some ground nesting birds like Lapwings resort to 'broken wing display' to lure predators away from their nest.

--- Swallows have very short but unusually broad beaks and the resultant large gape helps in catching insects easily in flight – 'feeding on the wing'.

--- Many seed- and grain-eating birds like Sparrows, feed their chicks insects, because of high protein value and easy digestibility.

I could go on and on recounting many such interesting '*gems*'. In fact Siraj would repeatedly tell me to join the society and I would postpone it, although, in my heart of hearts, I did want to join. Actually I was busy with IGNA, the German Returnees Association, of which I was the founder member and President for about a decade, and this took up a pretty big chunk of my spare time. However, I gave up on being on the managing committee of IGNA by the late nineties and utilised this opportunity to jump onto the BSAP bandwagon.

I remember my first outing with Siraj & BSAP was to the Manjeera Barrage. But strangely instead of going over the dam, we went below it and did birding in and around the dry river bed, me following Siraj closely. The

first bird I noticed, Siraj identified as the Large Cormorant, a 'lifer' for me! Of course many more trips followed, always under his tutelage, and I was hooked!

Since I was taking my baby steps in birding, I started becoming more aware of birds. One such exotic bird that I saw was in a tree in front of our house. As I could not identify it, I made a sketch and noted down different features and colours and at the first opportunity showed it to Siraj. He immediately identified it as the Indian Treepie. He was extremely happy with the way I had made the notes and declared that this was the right way to do birding and asked me to keep it up. He then proceeded to his book shelf and gifted me a copy of the book "A Pictorial Guide to the Birds of the Indian Sub-continent" by Dr. Salim Ali & S. Dillon Ripley, (1983). I am still the proud owner of this classic and I refer to it often.

Siraj was a voracious reader and his knowledge of birds was inexhaustible. Whenever we went on a birding trip, he made special efforts to gather around him the new-comers, including myself, and apart from identifying birds he would patiently explain about different aspects of birds and birding in general – don't wear bright colours, don't talk loudly, don't point fingers, don't disturb the birds, etc, etc.

Before I conclude, I would like to advise one and all that we must carry his legacy forward. During trips, the seniors should make it a point to teach and share their knowledge with the new comers, just as Siraj would have done. This, in my opinion, is the best way to make birding popular among the younger generation and citizens of Hyderabad.

I will always miss you, Siraj.

* * *

Siraj Taher

Rajashekar Tummala

I became a member of BSAP due to the encouragement of Aasheesh and Sirajji. When the National Seminar on Eastern Ghats was being organised by Environment Protection Training & Research Institute in Tirupati, Siraj A Taherji and I co-authored a joint paper, a Historical Review of Ornithological Surveys in Eastern Ghats of Andhra Pradesh, with special reference to Vernay's Survey of Eastern Ghats, and many other novel ornithological surveys; it is listed under South Asian Ornithological bibliography compiled by Aasheesh.

I used to interact with Sirajji during the Waterfowl Census between the years 1999 and 2003, which were compiled by him. He used to invite me to his study and share the repository of the references.

I miss the great philatelist too. Seeing his exclusive bird postage stamps, I too had started collecting "Endemic Birds of the World". I posted to him a spare copy of Paradise Flycatchers issued by Postal Department, India, for his compilation on Bird Stamps of India. I shared with him stamps issued by other Indian Feudatory states and French India and Portuguese India, which issued stamps on Indian soil. He wanted to publish these in the BHNS journal.

Once, I spotted a very large clutch of common sparrows in Dorli mandal, near Mancherial, Adilabad, in 2003. But for conserving and protecting them, that particular record was not published. As Editor of the Pitta, I acknowledged his seasoned acumen and forethought.

His wit and ability to answer naive questions of the new members was par excellence.

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A Rare Bird

Surabhi Bharati

I do not recall the exact year, but it was probably the early 1980s when I was introduced to 'Taher Saab' on a rainy day when I had gone along with Moorty, my spouse, for a lark. We were being picked up in a forest jeep to go bird watching! It was manna / 'maina' from heaven for hostellers starved of food, deprived of transport and any kind of adventure in the outdoors! I was a research scholar with my head buried in books – not necessarily for the same reasons as that of an ostrich, though!

On reaching the 'feeding' grounds, I saw a portly man with a cap on his head and a spring in his walk, a pair of binoculars dangling round his neck, a small white two-page checklist of birds in his hand and a pencil behind his ears. That is THE MAN, whispered Moorty in my ears! How do you know? I whispered back. Just WATCH him, said Moorty, grinding his teeth! I decided to sidle past several others to draw 'the man's' attention towards me! I had to know. I didn't believe Moorty blindly - I was a modern woman! I followed him like the rats following the Pied Piper. I was not alone. There were many hanging on to his every word! He would suddenly stop, whisper, point his index finger, and raise his binocs to his eyes! This gesture was followed by a hushed silence in the group. It was as if God had spoken!

Why were people following him like sheep? I had to know! I had managed to reach his side and suddenly the binocs were thrust in my hand and I was asked to look! I didn't know how to look into a binocs and there were very few around, people were dying to get hold of those binocs which were in my hand! I felt really important. Then the man asked me if I had seen what he wanted me to see and I looked up into a very sweet, smiling face of a man who was trying to teach me how to watch a bird. He asked me to follow him. We walked quietly, softly, and got as close to the bird as possible. At first, my bird brain did not see anything. I saw the Munias for the first time in my life! In North India we call little girls Munias! Taher Saab then asked me to put a tick mark on my wet, white check list. Moorty was very jealous! The great man had talked to me and shown me a bird! I became an early bird and went out for all birding sessions. I was caught - Hooked! An odd bird like me wanted to be one of the birds of the feather!

Hundreds of birdwatchers have been either trained by Taher Saab or come into contact with him. A person of great integrity, a true professional, but above all a person who, through his natural enthusiasm for birds, developed training of potential birdwatchers into a fine art. I am very proud to say that I was one of the privileged birders taught by Taher Saab. Later, as I came to know him better, I noticed he set and demanded high standards. He had many excellent personal qualities. He displayed great warmth, was a caring person, a very kind person, very hospitable, a person who loved company, fun and banter – I can see him in the fields walking a bit slowly, but as enthusiastically as I had seen him on the first day, and pointing at birds, as free as a bird, come rain or sunshine...

Taher Saab, I learnt many things from you. Your passion, dedication, eagerness, child-like enthusiasm... I miss you... why did you have to fly away!

* * *

Siraj Taher

Kevan Bundell & Vasu Reddy

I first met Siraj in 1984. My wife and I were walking in Public Gardens when we spotted a small piece of paper pinned to one of the trees. It was a notice inviting people to contact the Birdwatchers' Society of Andhra Pradesh. I rang the number at once, and Siraj answered.

Next thing we knew, we were invited to his house to meet him and his family, and soon after that we went out on a Sunday morning field trip. Siraj welcomed us into his birding life as if we were old friends. He was a wonderfully generous and modest man, ready to share his immense knowledge and delightful enthusiasm for birds with everyone. We miss him very much.

* * *

Taher Saab and Me

M Lawrence

I did not have the privilege of meeting Taher Saab. I joined the family of birders only in the year 2012. The first time was on an official BSAP trip to KBR Park, and I had the pleasure of being introduced to the birding family by Mr. Shafaat Ulla. What hit me then was that even in a gathering of people from such diverse backgrounds, age groups, professions and seniority, the hierarchy was (and still is) like a family structure. The only thing common was love for birds and nature. The more experienced members were pointing out birds, and explaining why and how the bird was being identified. Some of them also shared interesting experiences from the past, and that is when I heard, for the first time, the NAME.

I enjoyed the outing, and looked forward to more outings. As the interaction grew, I was guided by the younger and not so young and the seniors; there was this feeling of something being passed on from an era gone by.

Then a few more trips later, during an outing to Cherlapally, the feeling grew stronger - there was this discussion on the peafowl shedding its tail, and, age no bar, everyone had a say – just as, in a family, the wise ones first allow everyone to have their say. Later on, as we were walking back on the bund, I stopped to look at some large cormorants. There was this young man standing beside me, also watching the same birds. He suddenly asked me, "Do you notice anything different?" I replied, "I see a white patch in some of them." He then explained that I was looking at the juvenile of the species. Later on, I came to know that person better; and when I enquired how he knew so much, prompt came the answer - that he was birding since the age of ten.

Another time, as we were watching birds at Ameenpur, I met Aasheesh. A discussion came up about the Indian Koel's egg-laying habits; once again, I had a lot of my queries, which Aasheesh patiently answered, and he also got the whole group into the discussion.

Much later, my urge to learn brought me closer to Humayun (the young guru for many of us). Seeing my interest, he suggested that we go for an evening-night-and-early-morning birding trip to Ananthagiri Hills. That day, as we were driving, he talked about some of his experiences of birding in the earlier days, and it always seemed to begin or end with "Baba" and "Sirajsaab" being mentioned with lot of affection and love. I came to know that Humayun's father taught him birding with a lot of love and passion. But I still did not connect the NAME to "Baba" and "Sirajsaab". As days went by, the references to the NAME continued, but being shy of my ignorance, I did not ask anyone about it.

Then came our trip to Nagarjunasagar for the AWC. I met one of our senior-most birders, Mr Kulkarni (Kulu or Kulu Uncle, as he is affectionately known), as he was travelling with Humayun and me. Kulu would suddenly start narrating his earlier experiences with "Sirajsaab" and "baba", and these brief visits to memory lane enlivened the entire trip. At one point, he suddenly said, "*maloom Humayun, mujhe kuchh din pehle Tahersaab khwab me aaye, baba bahut gussa kare bhai*". That is when the whole puzzle of Tahersaab fell into place!

After the visit, I asked Humayun if he needed help with filling the AWC forms. "Sure," he said, "let's get together on a week-end, and I'll explain how to go about it". Sitting down at his place made me feel I was at

home - the atmosphere of a birder's home, surrounded by books, hats, pictures and memories of legend! While we were there, Mrs Siraj served us with endless snacks and tea, and I could feel how it must have been when Tahersaab was there.

At some point, I got to see the notepad of Tahersaab. At that moment, looking at that simple notepad, I realized why we were different from many of the other birding groups - "DOCUMENTATION" was the word that struck me. I also realized that the gift of systematic, meticulous work continues with Humayun and Aasheesh. Today, as a family of more than three generations of birders, we are way ahead of others because of the simple pen-pencil-and-paper, on which these priceless records were written and stored.

Today, as we are in the midst of the knowledge era, we mostly record our observations in the form of photographs. I feel if these photos were accompanied by a few words about the weather, surroundings and time, it would enhance their beauty, and also, when shared, could give a complete picture of the species to generations in the future.

While I was not fortunate enough to meet Tahersaab in person, this is one aspect of his legacy that I have seen being practiced by others, and I am sure Tahersaab will inspire all of us in systematically documenting, storing and sharing our observations.

* * *

My memories of Sirajsaab

Umesh Mani

My first memories of Sirajsaab date from my first birding trip, to ICRISAT in early 2006, which he also had come for. At the time, I was a "Sunday-morning-is-too-precious-to-spend-on-anything-other-than-sleeping" type of person, and I did not really understand what all the fuss was about. It was only after I saw people like Sirajsaab and some other senior members, and the passion with which they approached birding, that I too got imbibed with the spirit.

I did not have the opportunity to get to know him well, unfortunately. From what little I saw of Sirajsaab, he could be testy at times, mainly if you didn't do right by the birds, but he was also a gentle soul hidden inside a gruff exterior, and once he sensed that you were pro-birds, the warmth and kindness would unfailingly come to the fore.

The seriousness towards conservation, the absolute love for even the most common birds, the willingness to share freely of his bountiful knowledge and insights – all these were to be seen any time one got to talk with him. I remember one occasion, quite early in my birding avocation, when he had called me over to help with some paperwork, and he ended up spending some 3 hours (!) patiently taking down book after book from his vast library, and explaining interesting aspects from each – and this for a person he barely knew.

But then, he was like that.

* * *

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